

The Grudging Emergence of American Journalism's Classic Editorial: New Details About "Is There A Santa Claus?"

By W. Joseph Campbell

This article presents fresh insights into American journalism's best-known editorial—the New York Sun's lyrical "Is There A Santa Claus?" The common view that the editorial was an immediate success and that the Sun reprinted it every year at Christmastime until the newspaper folded in 1950 is inaccurate. The Sun in fact was slow to embrace "Is There A Santa Claus?" and resisted reprinting the editorial in the years immediately after its first appearance in 1897. The Sun's reluctant embrace of "Is There A Santa Claus?" likely stemmed from the newspaper's disinclination to promote its journalists as stars or celebrities.

The editorial's odd timing—it was published three months before Christmas—is best explained by the excitement of the girl whose letter of inquiry prompted the Sun's editorial. She said years after publication that, as a child, she began wondering at her birthday in July what gifts she would receive at Christmas.

A more precise understanding of the origins and emergence of "Is There A Santa Claus?" is important for several reasons. A fuller appreciation of the editorial's emergence offers a reminder that newspaper editors are not always as perceptive as readers in identifying and calling attention to the best in journalism. Repeatedly over the years, readers asked the Sun to reprint the editorial; ultimately, the Sun relented. Clarifying the lingering questions about the classic editorial also underscores the importance of treating cautiously accepted wisdom about fin-de-siècle American journalism. Recent scholarship has demonstrated how understanding of that period has been distorted by myth and imprecision.

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American journalism's best-known editorial was obscure in first appearance, incongruous in timing, and almost an afterthought in placement. The editorial prompted no immediate comment or reaction from other newspapers. That it ever gained iconic status is testimony to the persistence and admiration of its readers.

The editorial was the *New York Sun's* lyrical and timeless paean to childhood and the Christmas spirit, "Is There A Santa Claus?"¹ It was written by Francis Pharcellus Church, a veteran editorialist for the *Sun*, in reply to the inquiry of 8-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon. "Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus," she had written. "Papa says 'if you see it in the Sun, it's so.' Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?"



Francis P. Church
Century Association / Newseum

"Virginia, your little friends are wrong," Church wrote in reply. "They have been afflicted by the skepticism of a skeptical age." After ruminating for a few sentences about the narrow dimensions of human imagination, Church invoked the editorial's most memorable passages: "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias."

"Is There A Santa Claus?" was published 21 September 1897, more than three months before the Christmas holiday. It was placed in the third of three columns of editorials that day, subordinate to seven other commentaries on such matters as "British Ships in American Waters," ambiguity in Connecticut's election law, and features of the chainless bicycle anticipated in 1898.² Although it was published at a time when newspaper editors routinely commented on—and often disparaged—the work of their rivals, the oddly timed editorial drew no comment from the *Sun's* bitter rivals in New York. For its part, the *Sun* mostly ignored the editorial for the next ten years.

But readers noted it, found it memorable,³ and, in untold numbers, repeatedly asked that it be republished. "Every December,

as surely as the revolving year brings back the holiday season,” the *Sun* once noted, “we receive from our friends many requests to reprint again the Santa Claus editorial article written ... by ... Francis Pharcellus Church.”⁴ Requests often came from parents of young children, such as the letter-writer in 1918 identified only as D.F.C.:

I am an old time reader of the *Sun* and have a little girl, Anna, who seemingly is doubtful about there being a “Santa Claus.” I have told her that if she looks in the *Sun* on Christmas morning she will be convinced by reading the famous reply of one of your staff writers to little Virginia O’Hanlon, which I have oftentimes read with much pleasure. Please do not fail to reprint it in your coming Christmas number.⁵

Readers over the years found in its passages “a fine relief from the commercialism and unsentimental greed” of the Christmas season⁶ and “a ray of hope on the path to human understanding in our troubled times.”⁷ The editorial was also seen as a way for parents to answer children’s inquiries about Santa Claus, and be truthful in doing so.⁸

This article—which is based on a detailed examination of the *Sun*’s editorial pages at year-end from 1897 to 1949 and on a review of numerous newspaper articles over the years that quoted Virginia O’Hanlon—directs attention to fresh insights and little-recognized aspects about American journalism’s best-known, most-reprinted editorial. The article’s findings:

- The *Sun* was slow—grudgingly so—to embrace the famous editorial. The common view—that the edito-



Virginia O’Hanlon, about the time she wrote the letter that inspired “Is There A Santa Claus?”
Courtesy: James Temple / Newseum collections



American journalism's most famous editorial was obscure in its first appearance on 21 September 1897. It was placed in the third of three columns of editorials in the *New York Sun*. Courtesy: Newseum Collections.

Is There a Santa Claus?

We take pleasure in answering at once and thus prominently the communication below, expressing at the same time our great gratification that its faithful author is numbered among the friends of THE SUN:

"DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old.

"Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus.

"Papa says: 'If you see it in THE SUN it's so.'

"Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?"

"VIRGINIA O'HANLON.

"115 WEST NINETY-FIFTH STREET."

VIRGINIA, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, VIRGINIA, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, VIRGINIA, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, VIRGINIA, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

rial was an immediate success, that the *Sun* reprinted it every year at Christmastime until the newspaper folded in January 1950⁹—is inaccurate. The *Sun* resisted reprinting the editorial in the ten years following 1897. When it did, the *Sun* was reluctant, once making the gratuitous observation that scrapbooks “seem to be wearing out.”¹⁰ Not until the 1920s did the *Sun* routinely republish the editorial at Christmastime.

- The newspaper’s reluctant embrace of “Is There A Santa Claus?” likely stemmed from both Church’s tendency to demur in acknowledging authorship of his editorials and from the *Sun*’s disinclination to promote or identify its journalists as stars.
- The editorial’s incongruous appearance three months before Christmas in 1897 is best explained by the excitement of a little girl. Virginia O’Hanlon said years after publication that she, as a child, began wondering at her birthday in July what gifts she would receive at Christmas. Her excited speculation prompted her to write to the *Sun* in the summer of 1897.
- O’Hanlon intended her inquiry for the *Sun*’s question-and-answer column, which appeared from time to time on Sundays. She was surprised when her letter prompted a response on the editorial page. But her letter had been ignored or overlooked at the *Sun* for weeks. O’Hanlon said on a number of occasions that she had waited at length for the newspaper to address her inquiry. Church, however, was said to have written the reply “hastily, in the course of the day’s work.”¹¹ The explanation that reconciles the two accounts—O’Hanlon’s extended wait and Church’s quickly written response—is that the *Sun* for a time ignored or overlooked the letter that inspired American journalism’s classic editorial.

Why it matters

A fuller and more accurate understanding of the origins and emergence of “Is There A Santa Claus?” is important for several

reasons. Notably, a better appreciation of the editorial's emergence offers a reminder that newspaper editors are not always as perceptive as their readers in identifying and calling attention to journalism of significance and lasting value. The editorial's popularity thus offers insights into the latent power of readers to influence content. Repeatedly over the years, readers asked the *Sun* to reprint the editorial; ultimately, the newspaper relented.

Viewed another way, the *Sun*'s reluctant embrace of "Is There A Santa Claus?" suggests a remoteness of newspapers from their readers, even though U.S. newspapers have long been keen to find out about their readers' interests and preferences. In 1897, for example, the *Boston Journal* asked readers to complete and return questionnaires that asked about the occupation of the person buying the newspaper, the number of readers per issue, and the most appealing sections or content. The newspaper said it wanted "to know its readers better—their names, their occupations, and their tastes."¹² The survey attracted a fair amount of attention. The trade journal *Fourth Estate* said it represented "a most novel census of its readers, one of a sort we do not remember having heard of before."¹³

More broadly, a better understanding of the origins and emergence of the iconic editorial is important because it has been described as offering enduring lessons¹⁴ for journalists. "Newspapers today need Church's poetry on their editorial pages," Eric Newton, then of the Freedom Forum's Newseum, wrote in 1997, the centenary of "Is There A Santa Claus?" Newton added: "Too often journalists [in their writing] climb upon stacks of facts and fall asleep."¹⁵ Geo Beach, writing in *Editor & Publisher* in December 1997, said of the editorial: "It was brave writing. Love, hope, belief—all have a place on the editorial page."¹⁶ That it appeared in September and was not held in the pending file until Christmastime signaled, Beach wrote, the importance of "never holding anything back for imagined future work."¹⁷

Perhaps inevitably, some descriptions of the editorial's enduring importance have bordered on the extreme. For example, Thomas Vinciguerra wrote in the *New York Times* in September 1997 that the timeless appeal of "Is There A Santa Claus?" seems "to suggest that what most readers of editorial pages care about are ruminations on single subjects like blizzards and the death of a princess. For such observations can constitute a national gathering of sorts, validating emotions that people want to share but can't quite express."¹⁸ A "national gathering of sorts" was probably far from what Church and the *Sun* had in mind in 1897, however. More likely, Church

was guided by the contemporaneous view that editorials should be memorably bold. “Better no editorials than dreary ones,” a journalists’ trade publication advised in 1894. “Audacity is a necessary feature of every good editorial.”¹⁹

It is important for other reasons to fill in details and clarify lingering questions about the classic editorial. Doing so presents a fresh reminder about the necessity of treating cautiously the accepted wisdom about U.S. journalism of the late 1890s. Recent scholarship has demonstrated how understanding of that period has been distorted by myth and imprecision.²⁰ The notion, for example, that the *Sun*’s yellow press rivals in New York City fomented the Spanish-American War of 1898 is as implausible as it is irresistible and undying. The anecdote about William Randolph Hearst’s vow to “furnish the war” with Spain— purportedly contained in a telegram to the artist Frederic Remington while on assignment for Hearst in Cuba— is almost certainly apocryphal. Yet it endures.²¹ The notion that the *Sun* enthusiastically embraced “Is There A Santa Claus?”— and that the editorial was an immediate, often-reprinted popular success— are other, if modest, examples of the errors that distort understanding of a defining period in U.S. journalism history.

Moreover, a sharper understanding about the emergence of “Is There A Santa Claus?” offers insight into the differentiation that characterized U.S. newspapers of the late 1890s. Differences in appearance, typography, and content were marked among newspapers then, quite unlike the predictable homogeneity that typifies leading U.S. dailies of the early twenty-first century.²² The *Sun*’s reluctant embrace of the editorial indicates a sense of restraint— and abiding respect for the anonymity of the editorial page— during a time of pronounced, even routine self-promotion in American journalism. The self-promoting impulse was notably evident in the yellow press of Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer²³— and was apparent in other, more conservative newspapers of the time, including the *Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*.²⁴ The *Sun* largely (if not entirely²⁵) abstained from conspicuous self-promotion, an inclination that helps explain its diffident embrace of “Is There A Santa Claus?”

Finally, a more precise understanding of the origins and emergence of American journalism’s classic editorial is important because it serves to highlight a little-recognized irony. The editorial that the *Sun* was reluctant to embrace has become the single artifact most often and unequivocally associated with the newspaper that went out of business more than fifty years ago.

The worst of years

Undoubtedly, 1897 was among the *Sun*'s most distressing and unsettled years. Its eccentric and irritable editor, 78-year-old Charles A. Dana, took ill in early summer and died in mid-October 1897. Dana had been a force in American journalism for fifty years and the *Sun* thoroughly bore his imprint. To an unusual extent, he cultivated an intellectual component at the *Sun*, notably by recruiting a college-educated staff. At the same time, Dana was proud of his reputation as an old-time editor and had little use for many of the innovations of late nineteenth century. He wrongly predicted in the mid-1890s that illustrations in newspapers would prove to be "a passing fashion."²⁶ He conceded to disliking the linotype "because it didn't seem to me to turn out a page as handsome, in a typographical point of view, as a page set by hand."²⁷

In the old editor's last months, the *Sun* gave vigorous editorial support to two noisy campaigns ostensibly aimed at curbing the excesses and presumed demoralizing effects of the leading exemplars of what was called "new journalism"—the *New York Journal* and *New York World*. In their aggressive and self-promoting ways and in their eager embrace of technological innovation, the *Journal* (especially) and the *World* represented a kind of journalism antithetical to Dana's.

One campaign sought to rid public libraries, reading rooms, and social clubs across metropolitan New York of copies of the *Journal* and the *World*. The *Sun* took almost savage delight in endorsing the boycott, declaring it "a movement whose natural impulse is in the disgust and indignation ... against the licentiousness, the vulgarity, and the criminal spirit exhibited by those shameless papers with an effrontery almost without example in the history of journalism."²⁸ Nonetheless, the boycott exhausted itself by mid-year.²⁹

The *Sun* enthusiastically backed a controversial bill in the New York legislature in 1897 that proposed banning the unauthorized publication of caricatures. While almost certainly unconstitutional, the measure was inspired by hostility toward the yellow press and its flamboyant use of illustrations. The *Sun*, which seldom published pictures, described the legislation as "a wholesome, enlightened, and proper measure,"³⁰ which won approval in the state senate³¹ before dying without a vote in the lower house.³²

Far more embarrassing than either of the failed campaigns was the bankruptcy in March 1897 of the United Press, of which Dana was president. The collapse of United Press in a long and bitter

struggle with the Associated Press news cooperative was signaled by the defections in early 1897 of several leading United Press clients, including the *New York Herald* and *New York Tribune*.³³ Dana soon was forced to file the documents that formalized the United Press demise.³⁴

The humiliation of the United Press bankruptcy only deepened when, a few weeks later, the *Sun* printed an apology³⁵ to Frank B. Noyes, publisher of the *Washington Evening Star*, to settle a case of criminal libel.³⁶ Noyes had sued the *Sun* over contents of an editorial in 1895 that described him as “a thoroughly dishonest director” of the Associated Press.³⁷ In its apology to Noyes, the *Sun* said it retracted “any remarks reflecting either upon his personal or business integrity.”³⁸

In its editorial comments in 1897, the *Sun* was far more inclined to vituperation and personal attack than to evoke the eloquence and lyricism that distinguished “Is There A Santa Claus?” The trade journal *Fourth Estate* said the *Sun* was never happy unless it was on the attack,³⁹ a quality particularly evident in assailing the *Journal* and the *World*, which the *Sun* excoriated collectively as “a menace ... too vile for respectable people to read.”⁴⁰

The *Journal* brushed aside the *Sun*’s criticisms, saying they were motivated solely by the *Journal*’s rapid and enviable growth in circulation. The *Journal*, moreover, was charitable in marking Dana’s death in October 1897, devoting much of the front page to the eulogizing its foe.⁴¹ The *Journal*’s generous gesture was not matched by Dana’s more hostile and determined rival, Joseph Pulitzer of the *World*, which reported Dana’s death at the top of the obituary column on its back page.⁴² The enmity between Dana and Pulitzer was deep-seated and extreme, even by the standards of the late nineteenth century when many rival editors harbored deep grudges and routinely exchanged insults in print. Such resentments sometimes gave rise to lawsuits, such as Noyes’ action against the *Sun*,⁴³ and even to fisticuffs.⁴⁴

Dana and Pulitzer had traded barbs since the 1880s, when the *World* emerged as New York’s largest newspaper, luring many readers from the *Sun*. Their hostility turned exceptionally ugly with Dana’s vicious, anti-Semitic attacks⁴⁵ on Pulitzer who, in reply, called Dana a “mendacious blackguard” capable of “any amount of distortion of facts.”⁴⁶ In 1897, the *World* disparaged Dana’s newspaper as among the “derelicts of journalism.”⁴⁷ In reply, the *Sun* called the *World* “the shameless exponent in chief” of all that was “indecent and rascally in journalism.”⁴⁸ Against such acrimony

and venom, the delicate charm of “Is There A Santa Claus?” seemed decidedly out of place.

A grudging acceptance

It is widely believed that the editorial was an immediate success and that it was reprinted in the *Sun* at every Christmas season after its publication. Such notions, however, are disproved by a thorough review of year-end issues of the newspaper from 1897 to 1949—the latter date being two weeks before the *Sun* folded. The editorial was in fact reluctantly embraced. The *Sun* did not reprint it until December 1902—and did so then with more than a hint of annoyance. That it reprinted the editorial at all was undeniably a bow to its readers and their many requests.

In reintroducing “Is There A Santa Claus?” in 1902, the *Sun* noted: “Since its original publication, the Sun has refrained from reprinting the article on Santa Claus which appeared several years ago, but this year requests for its reproduction have been so numerous that we yield.” The prefatory comment closed with a gratuitous swipe: “Scrap books seem to be wearing out.”⁴⁹

The *Sun*’s disinclination to republish content—or indulge in what it called “repetitions from the past”—was not confined to “Is There A Santa Claus?” During the campaign against the *World* and *Journal* in 1897, the *Sun* cited but rejected a reader’s suggestion that it reprint a letter assailing the *World* and Pulitzer. The letter had appeared six months earlier. “Since then,” the *Sun* explained in an editorial, “the stream of fresh denunciations [against the *World*] is too voluminous” to permit the republication of what it called “repetitions from the past.”⁵⁰

The *Sun*’s reluctance to republish or to say much at all about “Is There A Santa Claus?” gave rise to error elsewhere. The *Arizona Republican* published “Is There A Santa Claus?” on 25 December 1897, but mistakenly attributed the editorial to the Dana, saying: “One of the best things the late Charles A. Dana ever wrote, and which ought to sanctify children’s and all humanity’s memory of that great man, was the following editorial reply to an anxious inquiry by a little 8-year-old girl.”⁵¹

The *Sun* did not again publish “Is There A Santa Claus?” until the Christmas following the death of Francis Church in 1906. In reintroducing the editorial that year, the sneering tone that accompanied republication in 1902 was absent. The *Sun* acknowledged the appeals of its readers, stating in an introductory comment that the editorial was reprinted “on this Christmas morning

at the request of many friends of the Sun, of Santa Claus, of the little Virginias of yesterday and to-day, and of the author of the essay, the late F.P. Church.”⁵² After Church’s death, the *Sun* was somewhat more inclined to republish the editorial. In the ten years from 1898–1907, “Is There A Santa Claus?” was reprinted in the *Sun* at Christmastime only twice. In the ten subsequent years, it was republished in the *Sun* six times.

By 1913, sneering references to worn-out scrapbooks were gone: instead, the *Sun* likened “Is There A Santa Claus?” to the Gettysburg Address—a work well known to readers. “Perhaps it is not too much to say that it must be classed with Lincoln’s Gettysburg address respecting the number of those who know its phrases and regard affectionately its sentiment and teachings,” the *Sun* said in reintroducing the editorial on 25 December 1913.⁵³ The *Sun* on that occasion acknowledged the editorial’s profound appeal to readers and its formerly diffident response to requests for republication: “Every Christmas season for the past sixteen years, the Sun has been asked by many of its friends to reprint the editorial article entitled ‘Is There A Santa Claus?’ ... Sometimes we have complied with the request; sometimes it has seemed better not to do so.”⁵⁴ The *Sun* did not explain why it sometimes “seemed better not to” republish the editorial. But undeniably, the newspaper was warming to the editorial. It said three years later in reprinting “Is There A Santa Claus?”: “Perhaps no other editorial article ever written has been republished so often or has been read by so many millions of people who have come to regard it as one of the loveliest utterances of the Christmas sentiment.”⁵⁵

Readers over the years implored the *Sun* not to fail to reprint the editorial. “It will neither be Christmas nor the Sun without it,” declared one reader in 1927.⁵⁶ “Every year, as I grow a little older, I find added significance in its profound thoughts,” wrote another reader, in 1940.⁵⁷

The *Sun* sometimes expressed astonishment that “Is There A Santa Claus?” had become so timeless and so admired. In 1918, for example, the *Sun* declared it was reprinting the editorial “with extreme pleasure that the vitality and charm of this famous piece of Christmas literature are unimpaired after a period long enough to make a voter of a new born babe.”⁵⁸ But it was not until the 1920s when the editorial began appearing prominently and without fail at Christmastime. The *Sun*’s owner, Frank A. Munsey, ordered “Is There A Santa Claus?” to lead the editorial columns⁵⁹ on Christmas Eve in 1924—a move that signaled the *Sun*’s complete recognition

of the exceptionality of an editorial it called an “immortal expression of faith.”⁶⁰ In the years afterward, “Is There A Santa Claus?” was the *Sun*’s lead editorial on 23 or 24 December.⁶¹

Accounting for the incongruous timing

A modest mystery has surrounded the editorial’s anomalous timing:⁶² Why was a Christmastime editorial published three months before the holiday? No exogenous factors seem to have prompted Virginia O’Hanlon’s inquiry. No prominent news reports appeared in August or September 1897 that discussed Santa Claus, Christmas, or related topics. Reports did circulate later in the year about efforts to discourage children from believing in Santa Claus.⁶³ A kindergarten in Philadelphia, for example, advocated telling children who asked that Santa Claus did not exist. “As long as [the child] catches the spirit of love and giving that is in the air,” the kindergarten’s director said, explaining the policy, “it is all we want.”⁶⁴

The *Sun* published “Is There A Santa Claus?” eight days after the school year began in New York City in September 1897,⁶⁵ coincidental timing that has over the years encouraged speculation that Virginia O’Hanlon and her friends were weighing the existence of Santa Claus as their classes resumed after summer vacation.⁶⁶ While it plausibly accounts for the reference in Virginia O’Hanlon’s letter her skeptical “little friends,” such a scenario is unlikely. Discussing the editorial years later, Virginia O’Hanlon said she addressed her letter to the *Sun*’s question-and-answer column and waited impatiently for the newspaper to publish a response.⁶⁷

The *Sun*’s question-and-answer column, usually called “Notes and Queries,” was not a daily or even a weekly feature. It appeared irregularly on Sundays, offering pithy and often witty replies to inquiries such as: “What is the derivation of ‘bunny,’ as used in the term ‘bunny rabbit?’”⁶⁸ and “Please state the exact method by which ‘selling short’ in stocks and grain is performed.”⁶⁹ Given its fact-based quality, the “Notes and Queries” column clearly was not best-suited to address a question about the existence of Santa Claus.

O’Hanlon recalled that the *Sun* did not promptly take up her inquiry. “After writing to the Sun,” she said in December 1959, “I looked every day for the simple answer I expected. When it didn’t appear, I got disappointed and forgot about it.”⁷⁰ One of her seven grandchildren, James Temple, said he recalls his grandmother saying that “a long time”—perhaps weeks—had passed before the *Sun*’s editorial appeared.⁷¹ Those comments indicate that O’Hanlon’s letter asking about Santa Claus was sent to the *Sun* well before the start of

the school year in mid-September 1897.

After arriving at the *Sun*, her letter was probably overlooked or ignored for an extended period. That there was such a gap seems certain, given both O’Hanlon’s recollections about having waited for a reply and the accounts of Church’s authorship. Those accounts say Church wrote the famous editorial in “a short time”⁷² or “hastily, in the course of the day’s work, and without the remotest idea of its destiny of permanent interest and value.”⁷³

In any event, the most plausible explanation for the editorial’s incongruous timing lies in the excited speculation of a little girl who, after celebrating her birthday in mid-summer, began to wonder about the gifts she would receive at Christmas. “My birthday was in July and, as a child, I just existed from July to December, wondering what Santa Claus would bring me,” O’Hanlon told an audience of Connecticut high school students in December 1959. “I think I was a brat.”⁷⁴

An exceptional tribute

Church’s authorship disclosed shortly after his death in 1906, in what for the *Sun* was eloquent and highly unusual homage. “For almost a third of a century, Frank P. Church was a leading editorial writer in the service of this newspaper,” the *Sun*’s said in an editorial published 12 April 1906, adding: “At this time, with the sense of personal loss strong upon us, we know of no better or briefer way to make the friends of the *Sun* feel that they too have lost a friend than to violate custom by indicating him as the author of the beautiful and often republished editorial article affirming the existence of Santa Claus, in reply to the question of a little girl.”⁷⁵ The *Sun* closed its editorial tribute by publishing the two concluding paragraphs of “Is There A Santa Claus?”

Announcing the authorship of its editorials was homage almost never paid by the *Sun*, which actively discouraged its reporters from considering themselves as newsroom aristocrats.⁷⁶ “No man may pick and choose his assignments,” a press critic wrote about the *Sun*’s staff in 1909.⁷⁷ Perhaps the only other time the *Sun* acknowledged the authorship of an unsigned editorial⁷⁸ was in 1927, when Harold M. Anderson was identified as having written “Lindbergh Flies Alone,” a tribute to Charles A. Lindbergh’s solo trans-Atlantic flight.⁷⁹

It was doubtful whether Church would have appreciated the tribute of the *Sun*’s disclosing his authorship. He was a guarded man who respected—even cultivated—the anonymity of editorial-writing. According to J.R. Duryee, a friend whose testimonial the

Sun published a few days after Church's death, "Mr. Church by nature and training was reticent about himself, highly sensitive and retiring. Even with intimates he rarely permitted himself to express freely his inner thought.

"I doubt if an editor was ever more consistently loyal in maintaining the privacy of the sources of his journal's statements," Duryee wrote. "In our talks together, I have frequently referred to an editorial my intuition told me was from his pen, but never could induce him to own the writing."⁸⁰ Church's unwillingness to acknowledge authorship of his editorials—as well as the *Sun*'s disinclination to promote its journalists as stars or celebrities—assuredly help explain the newspaper's diffident embrace of "Is There A Santa Claus?"

Church died childless and left no known trove of papers or correspondence. The papers of his brother, William Conant Church, at the Library of Congress offer no insights about Francis Church or the timeless editorial he wrote. He and Virginia O'Hanlon never met. She earned master's and doctoral degrees and for forty-three years was a teacher or principal in the New York City school system.⁸¹ Her marriage to Edward Douglas was brief and ended with his deserting her shortly before their child, Laura, was born.⁸² Virginia O'Hanlon kept the "Douglas" surname, however.

She came to embrace the recognition and modest fame associated with "Is There A Santa Claus?" She occasionally read the editorial at Christmas programs, such as that in 1933 at Hunter College, her alma mater.⁸³ Virginia O'Hanlon lived to be 81 and her death at



Virginia O'Hanlon in later life, with Santa and schoolchildren at a Christmastime gathering. Courtesy: James Temple/Newseum Collection.

a nursing home in upstate New York in May 1971 was reported on the front page of the *New York Times*.⁸⁴ Her daughter, Laura Temple, was briefly associated with the *Sun*, working at the newspaper's advertising office

for two years in the 1930s.⁸⁵ "They all knew who I was," Laura Temple was quoted years later as saying about the *Sun* staff. "And

we all had the same feeling about the editorial that my mother had—that it was a classic.”⁸⁶

Discussion and conclusion

The new details described in this article about American journalism’s classic editorial do nothing to diminish or alter the exceptionality of “Is There A Santa Claus?” For journalism historians, these insights represent fresh reminders about the importance of challenging and correcting conventional wisdom, especially about late nineteenth century journalism in the United States. Popular and scholarly understanding of that period has been distorted by enduring myths, such as those about the yellow press and the causes of the Spanish-American War. There is no small need to revise scholarly and popular understanding about the period which gave rise to American journalism’s most memorable editorial.

It is important to recall that “Is There A Santa Claus?” was published in 1897, an exceptionally robust year in American journalism. The editorial added to the striking richness of a year notable for the emergence and diffusion of the epithet “yellow journalism,” the first modern use of the term “public relations,” and the application of technology that allowed half-tone photographs to be printed in the main sections of newspaper on presses running at full speed.⁸⁷ The *Sun* of the late 1890s, however, was wary about the changes afoot in American journalism, resisting innovations in typography and technology that were to recast the appearance of American newspapers. The *Sun* instead cultivated a reputation as a writer’s paper⁸⁸ (even if the writer tended to remain anonymous), one hesitant to indulge in the self-promotion that was pervasive among large-city American dailies of the 1890s.

Its eccentricities and its disdain of self-promotion help explain why the *Sun* was slow to embrace what became American journalism’s classic editorial. Church, given the evidence that he deeply respected the anonymity of editorial-writing, also may have been responsible for the *Sun*’s reluctance to republish the editorial. As this article has shown, the *Sun* was somewhat more inclined to do so after Church’s death in 1906. Even so, the editorial did not routinely appear on the *Sun*’s editorial page at Christmastime until the 1920s. In the end, the persistence of readers—a doggedness which the *Sun* frequently acknowledged in reintroducing “Is There A Santa Claus?”—overwhelmed the newspaper’s disinclination to print “repetitions from the past.”⁸⁹ Audience response helped make

sure “Is There A Santa Claus?” lived on.

Endnotes

¹ “Is There A Santa Claus?” *New York Sun* (21 September 1897): 6.

² “British Ships in American Waters,” “The English Language in Connecticut,” “The Chainless Bicycle,” *New York Sun* (21 September 1897): 6.

³ Readers of the *Sun* were known to invoke the editorial in discussing controversies about whether children should be discouraged from belief in Santa Claus. For example, a letter-writer to the *Sun* said in December 1898: “A year ago, in a very beautiful editorial, the Sun answered a little girl’s question as to the existence of Santa Claus. The interest of your paper in this subject prompts me to call your attention to the outrageous presumption of certain teachers in the public schools in New York and Brooklyn” who had told schoolchildren that Santa Claus did not exist. See “Santa Claus,” *New York Sun* (22 December 1898): 6.

⁴ “Is There A Santa Claus?” *New York Sun* (25 December 1918): 6.

⁵ Untitled letter to the editor, *New York Sun* (25 December 1918): 6.

⁶ Quoted in “A Classic and Its Author,” *New York Sun* (23 December 1926): 16.

⁷ Mario Canevaro, “In Appreciation,” letter to the editor, *New York Sun* (27 December 1940): 16.

⁸ See, for, example, Mrs. G.C. Jefferis, “Santa Claus,” letter to the editor, *New York Sun* (12 October 1897): 6.

⁹ See, for example, “Girl Who Asked Sun of Santa Won’t Tell If She Found One,” *Washington Post* (25 December 1934): 14; Murray Illson, “Prompted Santa Claus Editorial,” *New York Times* (14 May 1971): 44; “Haynes Johnson, “One Gift of Words That Turned Into a Christmas Treasure,” *Washington Post* (25 December 1983): A3; Frederic D. Schwarz, “The Big Question,” *American Heritage* (September 1997); Mark Neuzil, “In Newspapers We Don’t Trust Anymore, Virginia,” *Star Tribune* [Minneapolis] (18 December 1997): 32A; “How Famed Editorial Came to Be,” Allentown [PA] *Morning Call* (25 December 1998): A36, and Chris Rovzar, “Sun Shines at Lord & Taylor Display,” *New York Sun* (14 November 2003): 13.

¹⁰ “Santa Claus,” *New York Sun* (25 December 1902): 4.

¹¹ See “Is There A Santa Claus?” *New York Sun* (25 December 1913): 8.

¹² Cited in “An Interesting Journalistic Census,” *Fourth Estate* (22 April 1897): 7.

¹³ “An Interesting Journalistic Census,” *Fourth Estate*. The *New York Times* said the survey illustrated “the extremely remote connection between the conductors of a daily newspaper and its readers.” See “Newspapers and Their Readers,” *New York Times* (18 April 1897): 20. The *Boston Journal* reported receiving thousands of written responses that addressed a range of topics. The respondents also indicated that “about four people read each

copy.” See “Note and Comment,” *Fourth Estate* (6 May 1897): 6.

¹⁴ See, for example, Geo Beach, “Shop Talk At Thirty: ‘Yes Virginia,’ 100 Years Later, Provides Enduring Reminder of Print’s Power,” *Editor & Publisher* (20 December 1997): 48. See also, Neuzil, “In Newspapers We Don’t Trust Anymore, Virginia,” *Star Tribune* (18 December 1997).

¹⁵ Eric Newton, “Why ‘Yes, Virginia,’ Lives On,” Freedom Forum online site, <http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=6220>; posted 16 December 1997.

¹⁶ Beach, “Shop Talk At Thirty: ‘Yes Virginia,’ 100 Years Later,” *Editor & Publisher*.

¹⁷ Beach, “Shop Talk At Thirty: ‘Yes Virginia,’ 100 Years Later,” *Editor & Publisher*.

¹⁸ Thomas Vinciguerra, “Yes, Virginia, a Thousand Times Yes,” *New York Times* (21 September 1997): WK2. Less reverently, Rick Horowitz wrote at the editorial’s centenary in 1997: “For a century now, readers have loved what Church created—but no more than journalists do. They’re ecstatic that they don’t have to crank out another Christmas essay of their own every year; they can just slap Francis Church’s ‘Yes, Virginia,’ up there on the page and go straight to the office party.” Horowitz, “Yes, Virginia, Faith Overcame Skepticism 100 Years Ago,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (21 September 1997): 3B. To be sure, “Is There A Santa Claus?” has attracted criticism and protest. In 1951, for example, participants at an anti-Santa demonstration in Lynden, WA, complained that the editorial encouraged Virginia O’Hanlon to view her skeptical friends as liars. See “Santa Survives Protest,” *New York Times* (23 December 1951): 24. A columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote, in 1997: “Fie on Francis P. Church! Foey to Virginia O’Hanlon! One hundred years ago, those two got together and cooked up what is America’s best-known editorial. . . . It’s not that I don’t hold stock in Church’s sermon. But allow me to add a little known but highly pertinent fact to the story: Francis Pharcellus Church had no children. If he had, he would have written something like, ‘Ginny, talk to your father.’ Then, he would have jotted down a note to the dad: ‘Nice try, pop. But reconciling lies is your job.’” See Andrew Herrmann, “It’s A Wonderful Lie,” *Chicago Sun-Times* (9 December 1997): 37.

¹⁹ The advice was published in the *Missouri Editor* and reprinted in “The Value of Editorials,” *Fourth Estate* (29 November 1894): 5.

²⁰ For an examination of the myth and distortion that have come to characterize scholarly and popular understanding of American journalism of the late nineteenth century, see W. Joseph Campbell, *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001).

²¹ See for example, Ted Curtis Smythe, *The Gilded Age Press, 1865–1900* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 187; David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 127, and Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 61–62.

²² For results of a detailed content analysis that traces the rise of uniformity

among seven leading U.S. daily newspapers, see Campbell, *Yellow Journalism*, 151–173.

²³ See, for example, “The World Inspires Charity for Cuba,” *New York World* (25 December 1897): 1.

²⁴ See, for example, “Top Notch of Journalism: Praise of ‘the Post’s’ Inauguration Souvenir,” *Washington Post* (7 March 1897): 10, and “Join in the Jubilee: All Chicagoans Help ‘The Tribune’ In Celebrating,” *Chicago Tribune* (11 June 1897): 1. The *Chicago Tribune* marked its fiftieth anniversary in 1897. No doubt indulging in hyperbole, the *Tribune* reported: “The scene at dawn was the liveliest ever witnessed around a Chicago newspaper office. The rapidity with which a certain supply of hot cakes is fabled to have been dealt out on some former occasion was a slow process compared with the celerity with which bundles of the Tribune were handed out to the distributors and newsboys. The latters were unable to supply the demand from women pouring into the city’s heart on their way to business, and these would-be purchasers sought their papers at the business office. The crowds grew until the police were compelled to form the people into double lines which extended in Madison street to State and in Dearborn to Monroe. Hundreds who couldn’t get into the lines thronged the streets until between 8 and 10 o’clock traffic on the sidewalks was blockedad.”

²⁵ For a rare exception, see the brief article titled, “Praise for the Sun,” *New York Sun* (9 December 1897): 1. The article quoted William Lyon Phelps, a literature professor at Yale University, as saying, “The Sun has the best accounts of current events of any newspaper in America.”

²⁶ See Charles A. Dana, *The Art of Newspaper Making: Three Lectures* (New York: Appleton, 1895), 98.

²⁷ Dana, *Art of Newspaper Making*, 74.

²⁸ “The End Is Approaching,” *New York Sun* (10 March 1897): 6.

²⁹ See Campbell, *Yellow Journalism*, 34–39.

³⁰ Untitled editorial comment, *New York Sun* (9 April 1897): 6.

³¹ See “Wants the Press Muzzled,” *New York Herald* (7 April 1897). The state senate’s vote in favor of the anti-cartoon bill was 35–14.

³² “Danger is Over,” *Fourth Estate* (29 April 1897): 3.

³³ “The United Press Assigns: Associated Press Triumphs in the Long and Costly War of News Associations,” *Fourth Estate* (1 April 1897): 1.

³⁴ “The United Press Assigns,” *Fourth Estate*.

³⁵ “A Correction,” *New York Sun* (17 April 1897): 6.

³⁶ “Sun Apologizes,” *Fourth Estate* (22 April 1897): 1.

³⁷ “The Work of Rascals,” *New York Sun* (22 February 1895): 6.

³⁸ “A Correction,” *New York Sun*.

³⁹ See “The Sun Shows Spite Again,” *Fourth Estate* (17 June 1897): 1. The article noted that the *Sun* in the aftermath of the United Press bankruptcy had assailed Whitelaw Reid of the *New York Tribune* “as a defaulter and in other terms more forcible than elegant. Mr. Reid treated the attack with silent contempt, as most victims of the *Sun*’s malice are in the habit of doing.”

⁴⁰ “Leprous New Journalism,” *New York Sun* (27 February 1897): 7

⁴¹ “Charles A. Dana, The Famous Editor, Is Dead,” *New York Journal* (18

October 1897): 1.

⁴² “Profession or Trade?” *Fourth Estate* (28 October 1897): 4.

⁴³ See also, “Ohio Editors at War,” *Fourth Estate* (10 June 1897): 3. The article recounted the arrest on criminal libel charges of Port Fullmer, editor of the *Homes News* in West Jefferson, Ohio. The charges were brought by a rival editor in London, Ohio, whom Fullmer’s newspaper had assailed in large headlines as “The Noted London Crook.”

⁴⁴ See, for example, “Editors Use Their Fists,” *Fourth Estate* (27 October 1898): 7. The *Fourth Estate*’s account said “mutual expressions of editorial dislike” gave rise to the fisticuffs between two editors in Springfield, Illinois.

⁴⁵ See Denis Brian, *Pulitzer: A Life* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 127–131.

⁴⁶ Cited in Brian, *Pulitzer*, 128.

⁴⁷ “The Derelicts of Journalism,” *New York World* (28 March 1897): 11.

⁴⁸ “A Steady Revolt,” *New York Sun* (10 April 1897): 6.

⁴⁹ “Santa Claus,” *New York Sun* (25 December 1902).

⁵⁰ “A Steady Revolt,” *New York Sun*. The *Sun* did reprint a brief passage from the letter which the reader had asked the *Sun* to “kindly reproduce.”

⁵¹ “There Is A Santa Claus,” *Arizona Republican* (25 December 1897): 7. The newspaper was renamed *Arizona Republic* in 1930. In addition, the *Literary Digest* printed Virginia O’Hanlon’s letter and the *Sun*’s editorial reply in its issue dated 25 December 1897. See “Topics of the Day: Some Christmas Reflections,” *Literary Digest* 14, 35 (25 December 1897): 1021.

⁵² “Is There A Santa Claus?” *New York Sun* (25 December 1906): 6. In addition, the editorial was the first entry in a collection, published in 1905, of notably cheery essays and commentaries that had appeared in the *Sun*. See *Casual Essays of the Sun* (New York: Robert Grier Cooke, 1905), 1–3.

⁵³ “Is There A Santa Claus?” *New York Sun* (25 December 1913).

⁵⁴ “Is There A Santa Claus?” *New York Sun* (25 December 1913).

⁵⁵ “Is There A Santa Claus?” *New York Sun* (25 December 1916): 10.

⁵⁶ Charles H. Clark, “To-morrow on This Page,” letter to the editor, *New York Sun* (23 December 1927): 16.

⁵⁷ “Canevaro, “In Appreciation,” *New York Sun* (27 December 1940).

⁵⁸ “Is There A Santa Claus?” *New York Sun* (25 December 1918).

⁵⁹ See untitled editorial comment, *New York Sun* (24 December 1925): 10.

⁶⁰ Untitled editorial comment, *New York Sun* (24 December 1925).

⁶¹ The editorial also figured in an ill-considered Depression era gesture by the *Sun*’s management. According to Haynes Johnson, a *Washington Post* columnist, the *Sun* in the 1930s gave employes framed reprints of “Is There A Santa Claus?” Johnson wrote: “In all the years my father worked as a reporter on the Sun, in time bringing honor to himself and his paper, that was the only Christmas bonus he ever received. Every Christmas that I can remember he would retell, [with] fury and relish, that story of holiday insensitivity in a time of great personal suffering. [The story] became part of our family Christmas tradition, one that still makes me smile so long after whenever I think of it.” See Haynes Johnson, “The Old Wisdom May,

After All, Offer a New Sense of Serenity,” *Washington Post* (21 December 1980): A3.

⁶² The editorial’s unusual timing tripped up at least one scholar. In her study of Charles Dana, Janet Steele mistakenly wrote that the editorial reply to Virginia O’Hanlon was “published on Christmas Day 1897.” See Steele, *The Sun Shines for All: Journalism and Ideology in the Life of Charles A. Dana* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 109.

⁶³ Such efforts were criticized by the *New York Journal* among other newspapers. The *Journal* declared: “Let us keep Santa Claus despite the outcry of the people who think that no deception can be amiable. There never was a child worse for belief in him.” See “Christmas, and Santa Claus,” *New York Journal* (25 December 1897): 6.

⁶⁴ Cited in “Santa Claus to be Banished,” *Philadelphia Press* (22 December 1897): 8. In an editorial condemning the policy, the newspaper stated: “The arguments against the myth if carried out logically would rule out all fairyland from a child’s life, would suppress the habit of the game of ‘pretending’ and make of children not imaginative human beings but wretched prigs to whom a large part of the literature of all ages would be a closed book.” See “The Tilt at Santa Claus,” *Philadelphia Press* (23 December 1897): 6.

⁶⁵ “Public Schools Open To-Day,” *New York Sun* (13 September 1897): 4.

⁶⁶ See Vinciguerra, “Yes, Virginia, a Thousand Times Yes,” *New York Times*. See also, Herrmann, “It’s A Wonderful Lie,” *Chicago Sun-Times*.

⁶⁷ Cited in Illson, “Prompted Santa Claus Editorial,” *New York Times*.

⁶⁸ “Notes and Queries,” *New York Sun* (12 September 1897), sect. 2, p. 3. The *Sun*’s reply: “Bun is provincial English for rabbit; bunny is a diminutive. Bunny-rabbit is pleonastic.”

⁶⁹ “Notes and Queries,” *New York Sun* (October 1897)

⁷⁰ Cited in “Writer of Famed ‘Santa’ Letter Has Heightened Christmas Spirit,” newspaper clipping from December 1959 (publication data missing), in possession of James Temple, North Chatham, NY.

⁷¹ James Temple, telephone interviews with author, 7 November 2003, and 19 April 2004.

⁷² Edward P. Mitchell, *Memoirs of an Editor: Fifty Years of American Journalism* (New York: Scribner’s, 1924), 112. Mitchell’s account says “Church bristled and pooh-poohed at the subject when I suggested he write a reply to Virginia O’Hanlon; but he took the letter and turned with an air of resignation to his desk” to write.

⁷³ “Is There A Santa Claus?” *New York Sun* (25 December 1913).

⁷⁴ Cited in “Writer of Famed ‘Santa’ Letter Has Heightened Christmas Spirit.” See also, Fred Kaplan, “A Child’s Query Echoes Across the Ages,” *Boston Globe* (22 December 1997): A3.

⁷⁵ Untitled editorial comment, *New York Sun* (12 April 1906): 8.

⁷⁶ See A.B. [Arthur Brisbane], “Hon. Charles Anderson Dana,” *Journalist* (15 May 1897): 26. Brisbane’s article stated: “There is no aristocracy in the *Sun* building. The editor is the boss, and every other fellow is whatever his work can make him. There are no such things as ‘inferiors.’”

⁷⁷ Will Irwin, “The New York Sun,” *American Magazine* 67 (January 1909): 305.

⁷⁸ Five days after Dana's death in 1897, the *Sun* published a signed editorial eulogizing the editor. See Mayo W. Hazeltine, "Charles Anderson Dana—A Personal Tribute," *New York Sun* (22 October 1897): 6.

⁷⁹ See "H. M'd. Anderson, Editorial Writer," *New York Times* (27 December 1940): 27, and "Brilliant Names Dot Sun's History," *New York Times* (5 January 1950). Anderson's editorial read, in part: "Alone? Is he alone at whose right side rides Courage, with Skill within the cockpit and Faith upon the left? Does solitude surround the brave when Adventure leads the way and Ambition reads the dials? Is there no company with him, for whom the air is cleft by Daring and the darkness made light by Enterprise?"

⁸⁰ "A Clergyman's Tribute to Francis P. Church," *New York Sun* (15 April 1906): 6.

⁸¹ See, "Virginia, Now 70, Quits As Teacher," *New York Times* (12 June 1959): 18.

⁸² See Kaplan, "A Child's Query," *Boston Globe*.

⁸³ See "Santa Editorial to be Read Today," *New York Times* (20 December 1933): 23.

⁸⁴ "Virginia O'Hanlon, Santa's Friend, Dies," *New York Times* (14 May 1971): 1.

⁸⁵ James Temple, telephone interview with author.

⁸⁶ Cited in John O'Mahony, "Yes, Virginia, It Is a Classic Tale; Kin of Santa-Letter Girl Recall Touching Story," *New York Post* (14 December 1997): 8.

⁸⁷ See W. Joseph Campbell, "1897: American Journalism's Exceptional Year," *Journalism History* 29, 4 (Winter 2004): 190–200.

⁸⁸ See Irwin, "The New York Sun," *American Magazine*, 301–310. Irwin's article was a laudatory assessment of the *Sun*. In describing the value placed at the *Sun* on well-written reports, Irwin stated (304): "in that office, he who has written a good story is greater than he who conquers kingdoms."

⁸⁹ "A Steady Revolt," *New York Sun*.

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